joel
oppenheimer

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names, dates, & places

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by joel oppenheimer

poems
the dutiful son
the love bit
in time
on occasion
the woman poems
just friends / friends & lovers

fiction
pan's eyes

theater
the great american desert

non-fiction
the wrong season

names, dates, & places

joel oppenheimer

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names, dates, & places

this book is for gregory
so he will know where i came from

FIRST POEM FOR MY LAST SON

for six months
he babbled in tongues
now he speaks american

which is what you do
you filter out all
the sounds you don't use

meanwhile i take lessons
with the master and he instructs me
to walk like a baby when he learns
the groin relaxed and the weight
carried below the navel

how much will i have to learn
from you oh my best beloved
while my culture falls on your head
and exactly who will win as
i go down and you come struggling up

the race is of course to the swiftest
yet gravity is on my side at last
and you have only strength
and your babble is too light-hearted
to last
        you will engrave your
head and body with loads too big
and your weight also will move upward
into your chest and your air will turn bad

there is nothing else i can tell you

but even when you were
speaking in tongues i didn't listen
and i never know even now
when you are telling me something

and this time for me
there will be no next time
no new sons to not hear

i have lost it again
as with all my sons

but i will try to learn to walk
at least while you can teach me
but you must bear with me
since it is hard even though
i try my damnedest
while your feet
find their own ways to friend
to mother brother father
going to the wall for support
relaxing the groin and carrying
the weight below your navel
while keeping your legs fluid
and the air in you around you good

FIRST SONG AT SAINT ANDREWS

redbud tree
magenta
hard-edged
in the sun

pure magenta
startles

in the next day's
grayness
softer edged
more a smudge
also startling
the center
carrying the force

redbud tree
from any distance
it is the leaves
one thinks
making the blur
of rich magenta
against the sky
against the lake

it cannot be ignored

actually small florets
ride each branch
profusely and
not the leaves

it is actually
flowers blooming
in the march air

one wants
a palette loaded
with magenta

the only time
in nature
it is allowed

not to mention real

one wants to sit
on the stone bench
squinting
holding
one's brush
up and out
just like
a real artist

one wants
to use up
a year's allotment
of magenta

the flowers are
tiny and true purple
in the grass itself

mingling with them
even smaller
light blue-purples
spread among them
jump the path
and take the other side

what a curious combination
for this season

but just last friday
in that colder
northern city
saw first crocus spring
all purple too
in a single square
of dirt from which
ailanthus grew
that hopeless city tree
which never knows
any other color
than sallow green
or dirty yellow
under city sky

so, everywhere
purple, purple-blue
and such
for spring

for a long while you
were owned by everyone,
an object, an
enemy, someone to
defend or excoriate;
owned but not sold
you said come my
songs we will sing
of perfections we
will get ourselves
hated; you said every
day as the sun rises
make it new; you even
said a long time ago
we elect either knaves
or eunuchs to lead us;
you were talking of
america; you were
not a nice man; you
taught us all the
language and you
reinvented the forms;
you lived these last
years in silence, telling
us something more; you
walked naked all your
life putting your
life on the line for
the taking, you were

bought, owned, now
you are dead and in
the perfect way of
this world, now
only the poets can
own you, barter
your brilliance in
their lonely rooms,
parlay your winnings,
fight over your
coat you never once
turned, now the
world is done with
you and only
the poets own you.

FOR CHARLES REZNIKOFF

1894-1976

outside the spring is here
for once calendar and air the same

streets full of people
coats open or off, unhatted
a field of flowers opening to the sun
spring! spring is here!

but he died not seeing this this year
he died in winter after many springs
but every spring he saw we see still
every spring he saw we see still

A LETTER TO PHILIP

can i any longer address you dear phil
when i have spent the morning
ordering my life in unrealities

the rent the food the clothing
the ten percent allowed for luxuries
the baseball register and the sporting news

which things are necessary in my world i say

i have written my oldest son
and sent a check to celebrate his nineteenth year
and i have yelled at my youngest son
to celebrate his curiosity which stalled my writing checks

my head is awhirl with money and games and family
and you are in the real world finally

now you are not only my brother
but the world's brother and the ant's brother
god's brother and even the foolish writer's brother

which is why i wonder how i dare start a letter dear phil
wanting to know the honorific when you must recognize none such
but there is a need to honor you somehow
as you honor me by every step you take

i think of you sitting silent sitting speaking walking
and i am honored
i have been given this grace to know a decent man
who does right things while i whirl in unrealities
writing checks and poems

"Sun penetrating young woman's blouse, outlining breasts,
reminds me of Zeus in love with mortal woman."
reminds me of me in love with mortal woman
and of better angles, and even, zeus forbid,
of the act of penetrating them

"I find farting as a pastime just as rewarding as
cigarette smoking. Besides, it relieves the tension
closer to the center of feeling in the stomach."
i find jerking off even closer to
that center, and far more tension-relieving.
i find cigar smoking a pastime.
i fart only when i eat vegetables, or too much,
or when i want to make a statement.

"Man or woman leaves bus seat beside me and i feel with
my hands for the warmth there left behind."
man or woman leaves bus seat beside me,
i feel for the ass that has sat there.

"I mistook a running motor this morning for a chirping bird."
i mistook a bird chirping this morning for
a running motor. I have been away too long.
i mistook a bee for an instrument of death.
i have been away too far. i do not confuse myself
by my own mistakes. i know when i am crazy, and
then take appropriate action. i move.

i will never have international acclaim in this fashion,
nor journals to publish for everyone's enlightenment.

THE YELLOW CRANE
from ts'ui hao

yellow crane gone with old man,
this house was built in their name.
the crane gone never returns,
every thousand years the same.

by day: clear sky, stream, bright leaves,
sweet grass, lush island, glad song.
then the night: which way is home?
river mists, sadness comes strong.

VOWELS
after rimbaud

a black, e white, i red, u green, o blue : vowels,
someday i'm going to tell your inner secrets
a, a corset of hairy shining flies, sequins
covering the stink of every body's bowels

and its dark gulfs; e, honesty of steam or tents,
proud points of ice floes, ermined kings, shivered star tips;
i, purplings, hawked blood, the smile of beautiful lips
as in anger or the raptures of penitence;

u, cycles, holy rolling swells of greeny seas,
peace of full pastures, peace of deep imprinted frieze
on wise men's brows, put there by alchemy and scored;

o, final trumpeter, full of coarse stridences,
worlds and angels travel through your round silences,
o, omega.
your eyes, pure violet outpoured.

HUNTER
for hp

in the sky, and
dog too
hound
the other stars

sword lifted spinning
my sky
slice the
moon in crescent
slivers
you are
so bright we
see you circle
every night
spring
comes
the great
bear awakens
hunter
be ready, dog
strain at heel

spring comes soon

SIOUX SONG

for vdl

it is raining
it is raining
we sit together
we sit together
the weather is inside us
the weather is inside us

POEM FOR THE NEW YEAR

31 december 1973

i shower carefully, scrubbing
my body, preparing myself
for new year. having been
a dirty young man shall
i now start being clean?
i watched your body while
you dressed. 'desire springs
in me yet, i ought to be
satisfied' is a line i wrote
fifteen years ago. now we
have grown older in our ways
and in our heads also. now
i dream of medusa, where it
was always her sister who
presented herself. now medusa
strangles me, and i am saved
by the old poet, he helps me
break loose. he tells me
he's never yet seen one would
hold on if you fought long enough.
i hope he's right. i woke from
that dream stiff-necked and
sore from the struggle, but
i had lasted another year
from the freezing of my breath.
today i saw a basilisk in my
dream who also tried to freeze me.
i woke abruptly, thrashing, safe
again, as he scuttled across the floor.

the basilisk does not grow
older, does not ever change.

we walk on, and sleep each night.
he said: hold on, hold on,
until the new vision comes.
it comes, it opens up,
it always comes. but some years
are long waits in which we
sleep and dream of basilisks
and mother medusa waiting
waiting to stop us. we cannot
stop. we cannot stop her.
someday we will welcome her.
medusa stay way from my door.
let me look once again at
a woman's body without the
mothers intervening, getting
in the way. let desire rise
in me still. i will be satisfied.

mothers: under the running water,
in this dirt of my life,
in the cold air of new year,
in the fire which sustains
and consumes us, bring me
to the next new year,
to the next growing old,
to the next growing up,
to the next growing out.

2 / 2 / 7 6

this day wet storm
moving fast from the south

very cold arctic winds
from north and west

no turning of ocean
no milding

temperature dropping
zero or below

wind howled all night long

could not sleep

poked my nose out
on errands early
no sun no shadow

later sun broke through
wind still strong
icy underfoot

in pennsylvania
he saw his shadow

six weeks or no

it is enough
as always

VALENTINE'S DAY 1974

listening to the stories
romance through the ages.
tonight i hear it again and
although we grow older we
are still moiled in it. is he
filled with so much passion
still, still unresolved, still
waiting like a lover for his
love made real? even doddering
will he beg her flesh to
take form before him, even
trembling with age will he
adore and lose:
laughing
and crying i listen. a
poet has only his ears.
i am glad he is still
passionate. i cry out my
own need. we grow old.
why does she not appear
before us before we die?
still and still, he says
over and over, be mine.

VALENTINE
1975

i gave her a wand,
a staff of life,
a staff of light,
with bands of all
the colors running
down it, lotus at
the head, a wand
with which to magic.
she disappeared,
the wand remains.
i gave her a
footstool too, so
she could rest her
feet. she ran. the
footstool is here.
the gifts given, and
the gifts left behind.
valentine day and
no presents left.
no presence left.
once more then into
the breach. learning
to take the armor off.
dan cupid are you
still aiming? valentine's
day i await you open-
handed empty-handed open-
mouthed exposed baring
my heart once again.

CULTURAL OPPRESSION

spring: the old
man watching young
girls playing
ball. odysseus
protect you old man
you will be turned
into a pig.

3/20/72

at 7:22 this
am my five
year old was
lacing up
his shoes, my
little one was
chewing on
his teether, my
wife was peeing,
i watched the
news on tv,
which is how
i found that
spring had sprung
bringing visions
of croci daff-
odillioes and
tulips blooming.
it was twenty-
eight degrees, a
schoolday, and
the sun just
angled round the
corner of the
building hitting
square against
the far side
of the courtyard
out my window.

SPRING AND SOME

the woman coming toward me
wears a red cape. she smiles
she likes my red hat and
she says so. the temperature
is dropping rapidly, the wind
is rising. they had predicted
rain and possibly snow; i
had not believed them. still
my red hat threatens to
blow away and her red cape
swirls about her. she says
i like your red hat, i smile
and say i like your red cape.
spring is coming by the
calendar, a red letter day,
but this day the temperature
drops, the wind blows up,
rain and possibly snow loom,
and we pass. red hat. red cape.

art, zat strain
means a daft
i do
    in which
tzara married
irrevocably us
and his dada
manifesto

HYACINTHUS
an april fool

hi, a
shy cunt. hunt
shy i, a. c.
ah, tushy inc.
such tiny ah.
uh, i shy, can't.

3 APRIL 1972

according to the an-
archist calendar on
my bathroom wall, just
90 years ago today
that dirty little coward
he shot mr howard and
laid jesse james in
his grave, oh lord!

was it so short a time?
i thought it was an
age and a half – not
a day somebody i
might have known might
have seen or heard
the sound of, robert
ford's pistol cracking
in the quiet afternoon,
jesse on a chair, as
he straightened out
that picture on the
wall, the world crumbling
over and over, the
anarchist calendar is
quite correct to print
this significant date.

FOR THE ANNUAL READING

9 may 1975

the cherry trees
finally abloom.
we have waited
so long for them
this year. each
year we wait a little
longer, and yet they
do come, their
fierce blossoming
in the gentle weather.

and i have told
you yes and yes
though you will not
believe me, so much
depends upon the
weather, how we
see each day. the
blossoming depends
upon that weather,
why not us?
so,
finally it is here.
now we are opened
too. exposed, now
we can wait for
new awakenings,
for revelations,
now, yes, we wait
for intimacies.

we are ready. the
cherry trees become
our flag. we move
ahead, into it all.

THE ANNIVERSARY OF ONE DEATH THE DATE OF ANOTHER, 7/22

JOHN DILLINGER

thirty-eight years ago to
day she put the finger on
you and the man shot you
down
both dick tracy's
crimestoppers and the
anarchist calendar agree:
your death occurred on
this date
it was hot
in chicago on that day
and you had gone to
the movies to escape
the heat
john-john did
your mother ever call
you that cuddling your
head to her bosom there
in the middle of america

CHI-CHI

a giant panda the
chinese sold you out
the british displayed
you in a zoo
they gave
you a russian lover
and he tried twice
and twice you rejected
him
the americans
wouldn't let you in
there was a cold war

your name meant
mischievous little girl
in chinese
where
are the high places
the cool winds
the tender bamboo
of that birthplace

you who went to
your grave untouched
as emily dickinson

only life violated
either one of you

A THANKSGIVING GRACE

for that we eat
while we argue about feeding others
for that we live
while killing others
for that we prosper
while robbing others
for that we sing
while silencing others
for that we are ourselves
while making others be us too
for that we find love
while hating others
for that we learn
while we refuse to learn

he said:
"if we do not count this blessed
let us change our religion"

A DIFFICULT GRACE

for the children, thanksgiving 1974

that there is food. where?
that mother earth keeps us. where?
that father sky guards us. where?
that we pay our thanks to
mother earth and father sky. who?
what? when? where? why?
that there is honesty and decency. where?
that evil is defeated. huh?
that evil is losing ground. huh?
that we are getting better. huh?
that there is love.
there is love.
that there is enough love for all of us.
is there enough love for all of us?
that the world is good. what is the world?
that in the touch of the world,
in the turn of the world,
is all the food we need.

GRACE

over the river
through the trees
grandmother's house

old and wise
she feeds us
we eat at her table

when we die
we will live there
forever

we are well fed
in her house
beside her

as we are not
in our own
very often

and the beds are soft
to sleep in there
in her house

for which we give thanks
and for this journey
we must keep taking

over the river
through trees
to her house

we give thanks
she has set a table
before us

THE NEW YEAR

signs and portents
omens
bodings
good and bad beginnings

it's january second

the leather-bound
slim-line
pocket diary
is still up-to-date

i have entered and attended
and then crossed out as done
everything

i have gone to the party
i have greeted the arrival of friends
i have read at the church
i have spent 6.35 on a business lunch
and entered an address to be carried
into the new address book

there are things to do
as far ahead as january 17th
and this very friday i have lunch with vmc

it is clear i am entering something
is it the new year?
i hope so
a woman smiled at me in the street today
which hasn't happened since 1972

on the other hand the butcher was closed
on wednesday instead of monday
and paul knows the lady who smiled at me
and he says she is crazy

the world remains but then so do i

and the sun which rose this morning
showed that world to me
i hug
the ground to make my tour

i keep up-to-date at least this far
and the year is two days old

THE BIRTHRIGHT

there is a corollary
in astrology that tells us
it's not only the time
of our birth but place as well
that determines houses
we are born to

the astrologer speaks
while i bemoan the fame
i'm lacking
tells me
my sun needs moving
into the tenth house
since that controls such things

i run to the atlas
and discover that tenth house
holds novaya zemla
workuta perm sverdlovsk
omsk karaganda tashkent
karachi the long sweep
of the indian ocean
the seychelles the maldives
mauritius la reunion and down
at the very bottom of the map
heard island sitting on
the kerguelen-gaussberg ridge

what a choice it is
russian pakistani penguin
what a way to be famous
in our time

my father would not be able
to commute from such far places
my mother couldn't seek
the foods she knew i needed

suppose the boys i'd run with
or the girls so nubile twelve
or even younger in such places

suppose the clothes or language
i would have to deal with

suppose what my stars might lack
in any of those places
and the poems i'd write or
never would have written

suppose fame for a lonely figure
dancing in siberian snowscapes

if it had only been tahiti
or kabul i would have moved
even ulan bator to which it
comes so close
                the fault is
not in our stars but in ourselves
where we were born so far

IF THERE WAS SENSE

to get there you would
have to come up the
missouri into the white,
or coming from the
west, cross the badlands.
from the south the
sand hills would
block you, you would
have to work to get
there. i sit here
writing, thinking
of where i should be
if there was sense,
thinking of all the
provisional brigades
silent, unmoving,
wondering where they
are, where we are.
thinking of the land
lost, the country
lost, the power lost
because no one moves.

if there were sense the
brigades would be forming,
the long columns would
stream toward wounded
knee. if there were
sense the passes would
clog with us, the
prairies would shake
with us, long files
would come riding up
from the south
carrying the deserts
with them.
quakers
ready to lie down,
abolitionists risen
and fierce, lord
grizzly and the
mountain men, the
woodstock kids,
the angels even,
king's people, malcolm's,
black moslems, hanufi,
jews, irish, italians,
chinese, even the
buckleys screaming
for freedom. great
columns of smoke on
the horizon by day,
great plumes of dust
rising, great pillars
of fire by night. this
is a picture i could see
if there were sense.

if there were sense
i could hear
a gigantic shout: give
it to them, whatever
they want. give it
back. give it back.
let them have it, they
can do no worse. a
great irrational shout:
give them south dakota,
give them the black hills
and the great plains,
the prairies, taos,
blue lake, the mountains,
the father of rivers, the
woodlands, give them
manhattan, long island,
terre haute, the high land.
give them the thousand
lakes and the thousand
islands, give them
okefenokee and the great
dismal swamp, give them
their land. they can do
no worse. give them their
hostages against fate, their
lives against death, give them
give them give them give them.

MAN AND BOY

i was born
came out of my mother
nursed
lay in my crib
grew grew grew
talked and then walked
became a boy
went to school
learned lusted did
made sons
earned my keep
got tired
slept
worked some more
kept writing

suddenly
my oldest son
is living in his own house
shares it with a woman

and somewhere in kansas
a mother
is thinking over
the same chain
in respect to herself
and her beautiful daughter

i hope she's as happy
as i am
as renewed

i hope she's not
worried about aging

we could meet
to talk
it over

THE RE-ORGANIZATION

sorting
ordering it
what will we not find

letters bills receipts
answers unmailed or
not yet written
notices of ours and
everybody's work
advertisements and even poems

now each slides
into its own folder

if this one
had been answered
would i not now be teaching
in iowa and married
making steaks outdoors

if this one had not
been answered would i not
now be teaching in iowa married etcetera

each slides into its folder

the desk is clear and soon
the table also will be clear
and nothing will pile up from now on

and i will have
a flat red 'in' box and
a flat blue 'out' box so that
matters will be taken care of
and the bills also will be paid on time

and then i will write all the poems

SERVING NOTICE

i will not be
that single daddy
my friend had
roasting a leg of lamb
every sunday
slicing neat slices
through the week

these kids
will eat differently
every night

their clothes will fit
and not be put up with

and they will wear
their hats and rubbers

and in my bed
i'll dream whatever dreams
are necessary

and i'll curl those bodies
i can or want to
around my body

and i'll take the necessary time

and i will not make
leg of lamb each sunday
slicing slices through the week

CELEBRATING THE PEACE

9-15 may 1975

if you celebrate the end
of a war you are celebrating
that war.
go home my
townspeople into your own houses
that is where peace begins.
the war is starting
what speeches will you make
or hear that have not been
made or heard by you before?
the war is starting again
in what way by gathering
to reconstruct air that was before?
how by gamboling before the orators
on sunny days to make a peace?
the war never ended
you are gloating you are waving
flags in triumph.
no god no master
the flags said in paterson so
long ago the silk strike the
only flag i wish to see no
wars no governments no states
they take umbrage like a human being.
the war goes on forever
forget the dead people, forget
limbs piled in earlier bloody
wars, forget blasted innards, eyes
seared, leaves gone, earth scorched –

yes we did that too – forget
homeless people, peopleless houses,
forget helicopters falling in the water,
forget the gold that weighs those choppers down.
the war is over but a ship has been
captured by them and retaken by us
and the choppers have landed the marines
no rhetoric will make it as it was.
the nature of peace changes by the war before.
dead grandparents would not recognize this peace.
and theirs would not recognize the peace they knew.
so many wars.
there is no peace
if you must celebrate it. parade parade
march your banners and your selves you
are victors you have triumphed over
other people you have won. what? you
have won what? peace is the absence
of a triumph it is quiet singing in
your house and bed it is turning to
your own concerns and pleasures.
there is heavy small arms opposition
the enemy has released their captives
stop celebrating. *celeber* : frequented
or populous. wars. occasions of wars.
they are frequented, populous, the
people stream one way or the other
under orders or because of fear. peace
comes from *pactum*, a bargain, a bargain
made that we shall be left alone.

several choppers were downed in the assault
the ship has been returned
the men are safe
the marines are still engaged
let us lay down this burden down by
the riverside, let us feel peace
in our hearts and minds let us have
no more celebrations that celebrate
what we have beaten lest we forget
what it was was won and we become
conquerors and strut as certainly
as jack boots in another place.
the fighting goes on
the war goes on
crow triumph. peace cannot ever win.
destroy the word to save it. we
have heard that before.
there is no peace
build such a chain of people
you will not need to celebrate
you will not need these gatherings
except for the work of hands. these
other works will destroy us every time.
do not go to the party. do not
celebrate the end of war you
celebrate the war
there is never any peace
there will never be peace
the war goes on
the marines are landing
we don't take shit from anyone
we'll show them
peace is not a victory but a natural state
do not celebrate the end of war
nobody wins

joel oppenheimer was born and raised in yonkers, new york, went to college at black mountain, and has lived since 1953 in new york city. this is his seventh collection of verse; he has also written several plays, a book of short stories, and a non-fiction book about baseball. he worked as a printer until some twelve years ago; since then he has supported himself as a columnist for the village voice, a poet-in-residence at city college (both in new york), and as a free-lance writer. he has been winter poet at st andrews presbyterian college, and summer poet at the college of the atlantic in bar harbor, maine.

he believes in the occasional poem as the medium for verse, and says "a poem is the answer to a question you did not know you'd asked yourself".

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This dear poet has always made *care* and *humor* the lovely human terms they can be. So– opt for Oppenheimer! He'll save the world yet. . .

ROBERT CREELEY

Wherever it comes from, a newspaper, a book on the urban psychology of baseball, or a poem on the matters of love, the voice of Señor Oppenheimer is one you can trust.

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